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AUTHOR McGeever, Charles John
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to advance the state of chamber-theatre theory by providing a mechanism not only for the staging of works of prose fiction using several narrators but also for those works which have been cast in a temporal sequence inconsistent with the customary perception of time. Venn diagrams are used to represent logical relationships of temporal composition through the inclusion, exclusion, or intersection of component circles. This analysis is specifically applied to a portion of Ken Kesey's novel "Sometimes a Great Notion." (Author/KS)

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Chamber Theatre:

Staging Defamiliarized Prose

John Charles McGeever

The current theoretical material regarding the nature of Chamber Theatre evidences a consistent theme: Chamber Theatre is concerned with the study of prose fiction, especially its "central intelligence," through the medium of dramatic performance.[1] Though the major thrust of articles and texts regards the single narrative voice and its control upon the production,[2] several recent statements have begun to address more sophisticated performance expectations. Coger and White, for example, discuss the different type of performance strategy required in the staging of Virginia Woolf's multiply narrated work, To the Lighthouse. They state:

> Perhaps no narrator other than the characters themselves would be needed. Each character could read not only his lines of dialogue, but those portions of the narration and description seen from his point of view. Or, one might use the narrator for some portion and enter the minds of the characters in other portions.[3]

Coger and White's assumptions appear to be intuitively sound, but their conclusions provide little tangible direction. However, Judith Espinola in her article, "The Nature, Function and Performance of Indirect Discourse In Prose Fiction," provides a paradigm that supports her contention for multiple narration that "the employment of each kind of discourse permits the simultaneous projection of two points of view: narrative and character."[4]

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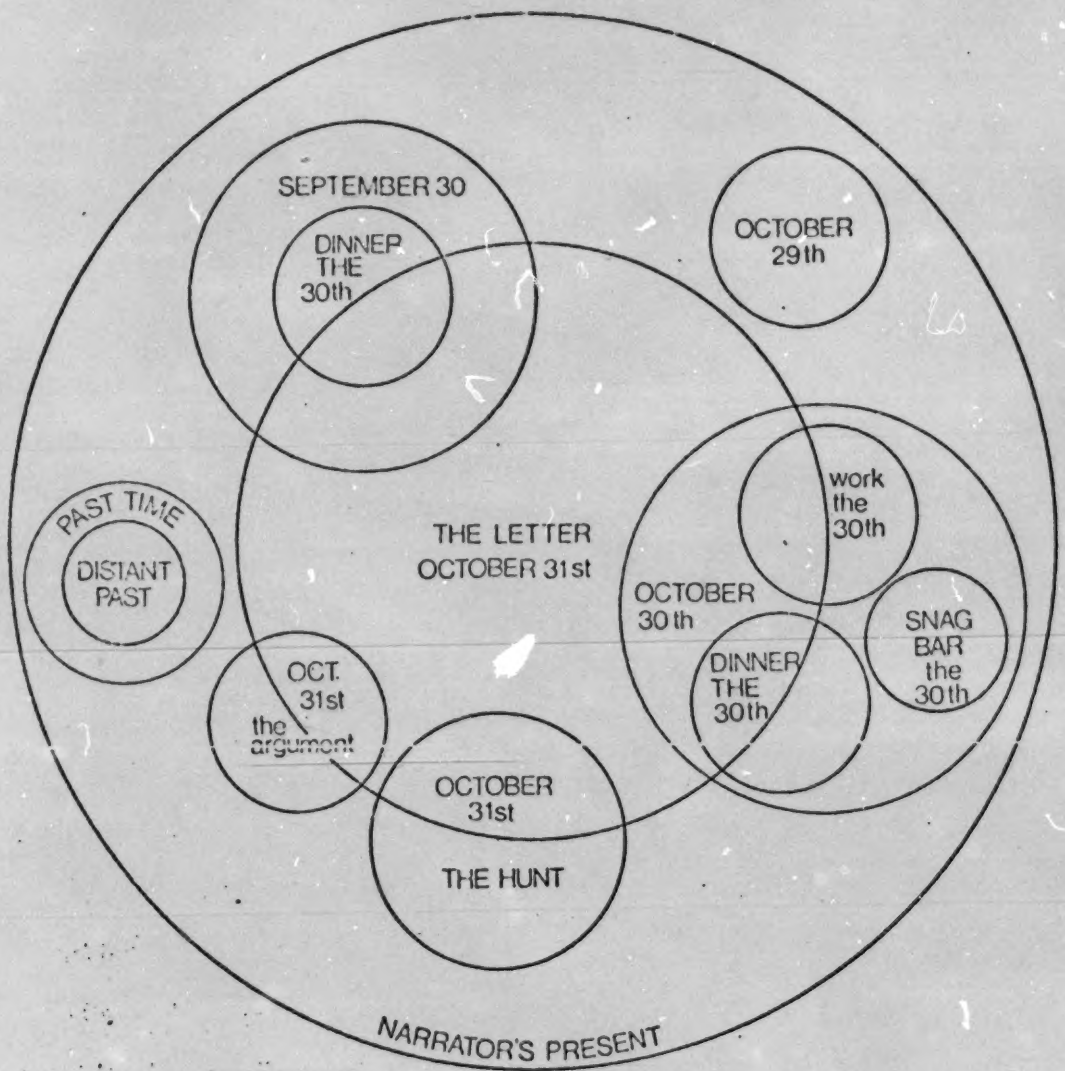
The purpose of this paper is to advance the state of Chamber Theatre theory by providing a mechanism not only for the staging of multiply narrated works of prose fiction, but for those works which have also been cast in a defamiliarized pattern of time. The mechanism is the Venn diagram and is applied, in this analysis, to a portion of Ken Kesey's novel, Sometimes A Great Notion.

The Venn diagram represents logical relationships through the inclusion, exclusion or intersection of component circles. It can be employed as a staging determinant in a Chamber Theatre production for those works in which a defamiliarized pattern of temporal composition has been used by the author of a prose work. The Venn diagram is the director's mechanism for synchronically apprehending the time levels he wishes to present.[5] And, the degree to which it is implemented with all of its intricacies for an audience would likely depend upon the sophistication of the stage machinery available to the director and the audience's ability to comprehend the use of the Venn diagram in performance.

Plate I represents a possible staging technique based upon the function of time and the relationship of individual incidents within Sometimes A Great Notion.[6] This model would satisfy both the author's intention as well as the audience's need for clarity. Plate I, representing a floor plan for the production, has been structured in a clockwise pattern. The thirtieth of September is near the apex of the circle at a point slightly left of the number twelve on a clock face.

PLATE I



TOP VIEW

All the succeeding events have been plotted in a chronological arrangement consistent with the audience's spatial apprehension of diachronic time.

Two particular events intersect with September 30th: the dinner on that evening and Leland's letter, written one month later, October 31st. In the portion of Spetember 30th which does not intersect with the letter or dinner, individual characters have spoken about the events of that day either through dialogue with another character or through internal monologue. But, these individual characters have no control over Leland's letter, nor does the letter recognize their conversations or private thoughts. Yet, the circle labeled September 30th has also been included within the largest circle of the Venn diagram, represented in Plate I as the narrative superstructure of the novel. All information rendered to the audience from this circle belongs exclusively to the narrator, Kesey as implied author. In a familiarized, or chronological pattern, however, Plate I would have been represented in a pattern illustrated by figure 1 with the initial event located on the reader's left and the terminal event on the right. (See, figure 1.)

In figure 2, an isolated and more detailed segment of Plate I, Leland functions both as a character in the September 30th sequence and as a narrator of the letter which occurs a month later, on Halloween. In figure 2, Leland-as-character exists in the satellite circle and only has access to the Halloween circle whenever the two intersect. Only the third-

Distant Past	Past	Sept. 30	Oct. 29	Oct. 30	Oct. 31	Narrator's present
		Dinner	Evenwrite and Eggleston	Work Dinner Snag Bar	Hunt/seduction Argument Letter	

Fig. 1--Familiarized Time Pattern

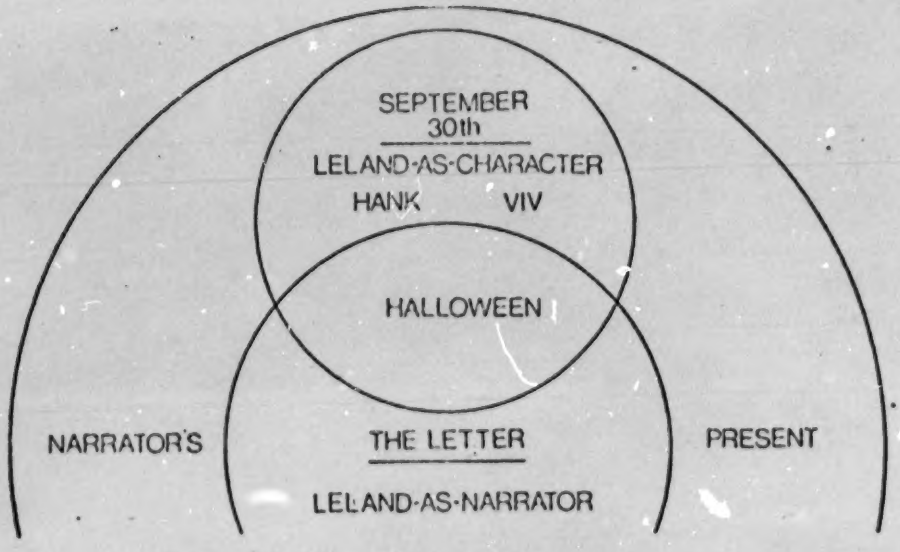


Fig. 2--Isolated segment of Plate I.

person narrator has unrestricted movement into and around any of the orbits (See, figure 2).

In staging this segment, the satellite frame, for example, could be placed upon a riser behind Leland's compositional frame. Leland could either enter the frame and address Hank and Viv when that activity is suited to the story, or he could be double cast. If the director allows Leland to move in both circles either as character or narrator, he would have to suggest that his actor employ an on-stage focus in the satellite frame and speak directly to Hank and Viv whenever his speech was quoted directly in the text. In those instances in which Leland speaks in the first person as he composes the letter, his focus should be off stage suggesting that the area inhabited by the audience becomes the analogue for Peters, the letter's recipient. If double cast, Leland-as-character would likely maintain a strict on-stage focus, while Leland as narrator could employ a combination of two focuses dependent upon where the director had wished to place Peters.

In the October 30th sequence, the intersections of time become more complicated and less familiarized due to the number of points-of-view which are represented. In order to illustrate this situation (See, figure 3), the floor plan for October 30th has been isolated from Plate I and shifted on its axis at a right angle to the audience. Here, again, the omniscient narrator may hover between or inside any of the circles because of his unlimited perspective, while the

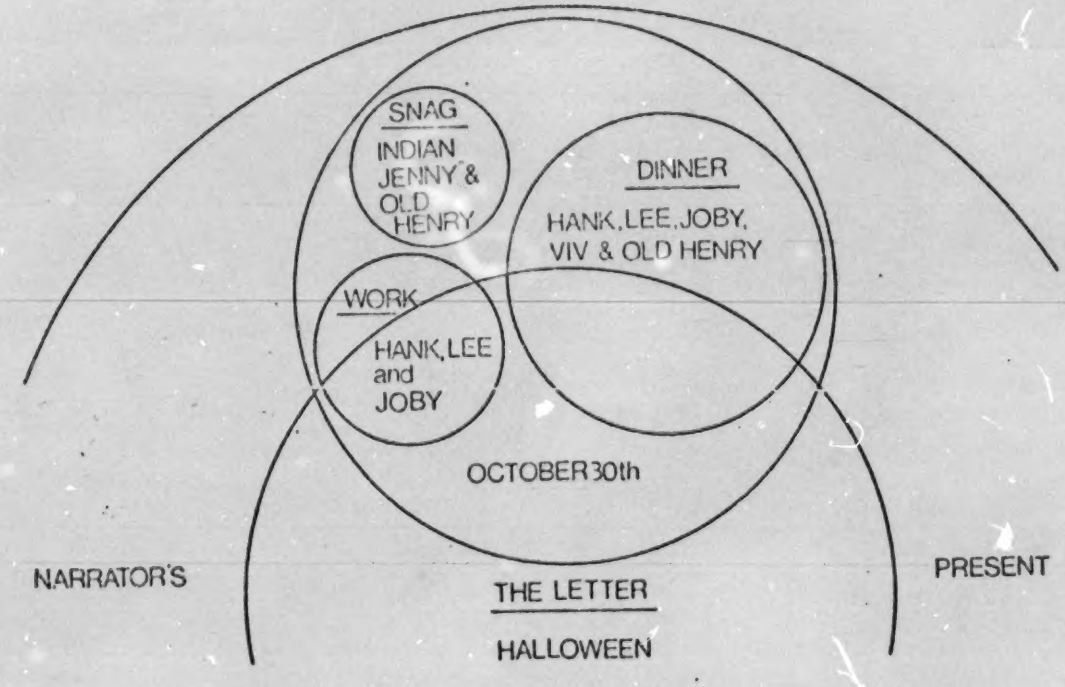


Fig. 3--Isolated segment of Plate I.

participants have been variously restricted to those intersections which may accommodate their knowledge of events. Indian Jenny, for example, has no direct knowledge of the Stampers. And, with the exception of the time old Henry spends in the Snag Bar, the Stampers have no knowledge of Indian Jenny. The Snag Bar sequence is narrated almost entirely by the omniscient narrator with brief episodes furthered through the perspectives of the characters in the Bar itself.

The return from work on October 30th contains narrative sequences sponsored through several perspectives: Joe Ben's, Lee's, Hank's, and the omniscient narrator's. In the text, Viv is part of the connecting sequence between the return of the men from work and the dinner that evening, and she would speak from the large circle, now inhabited by the other men, dated the thirtieth of October. Some of these events (the return from work and the connecting sequence) were incorporated into Leland's letter which, in a familiarized sense of time, would not have been composed for another nine hours. The staging of figure 3, therefore, would allow the Chamber Theatre audience to synchronically apprehend the diachronic structure of this defamiliarized section of the novel.

By repeating the patterns illustrated in the sample floor plans suggested by the concept of the Venn diagram, the director of a Chamber Theatre production is equipped with a conceptual device that more accurately portrays and communicates notions of time than anything currently

available in Chamber Theatre theory or practice. While this mechanism is able to portray defamiliarized time with clarity, it would appear unnecessary for a director to rigidly adhere to the Venn diagram as an exclusive staging mechanism. The diagram is based, after all, upon a perspective afforded few audience members. That is, one looks down at the model in order to comprehend it. Once completed, the diagram could be "opened up," stretched across a horizontal plane without loss of its ability to stabilize an audience's perception of the interrelatedness of defamiliarized patterns of time.

ENDNOTES

[1]In Charlotte Lee's text, Oral Interpretation, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1965), the author quotes Robert Breen as stating: "The techniques of Chamber Theatre were devised to present the novel . . . on the stage so that the dramatic action would unfold with full and vivid immediacy, as it does in a play, but at the same time allowing the sensibility of the narrator, or the central intelligence in the form of a character, to so condition our view of that action that we who listen and watch would receive a highly organized view and impression of it," p. 230. Wallace Bacon, in The Art of Interpretation, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1972), notes: "It is a virtue of Chamber Theatre that it vivifies narration and underscores the nature of point of view and the shifting of locus and perspectives. It was in the interest of drawing the attention of students to the vitality of the narrator's voice, indeed, that Chamber Theatre was first created," p. 421. Jody Yordan King feels that the process of Chamber Theatre "tries to capture the simultaneity of action found in dramatic material, and at the same time . . . examines the motivations behind these actions." [Jody Yordan King, "Chamber Theatre By Any Other Name . . . ?," Speech Teacher, XXI (September, 1972), 193-96.] Leslie Irene Coger with Melvin White believe that this mode approaches literature as a coalescence of dramatic elements, the "text" and "sub-text" of literary art. [Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White, Readers Theatre Handbook (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1973).] "Text" and "sub-text," however, are two terms most frequently associated with Irene Coger who specifically uses this vocabulary in her article, "Interpreter's Theatre: Theatre of the Mind," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLIX (April, 1963), 157.

[2]Wallace Bacon and Robert Breen's interpretation text, Literature As Experience (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), discusses performed prose. The authors state: "The particular quality a story takes on, the nature of its action, is strongly influenced by the angle or position from which the events are seen. . . . James counted heavily, in his best work, on the presence of a sensitive, intelligent spectator who could function as a thinking camera," p. 216. It may be noted here that the implied thrust of the authors' remarks is that novels are governed by single voices. While Bacon later qualified that remark in the Art of Interpretation, stating: "Points of view may indeed be multiple. Sometimes the narrator is submerged, lost in the presence of the characters speaking, and the interpreter must be careful not to reduce the significance of the character in maintaining a fixed point of view," the emphasis is clearly upon single voices and single performers. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 246. [Italics, mine.] I have also been unable to

find any reference to multiple narration in Joanna Maclay and Thomas O. Sloan's work, Interpretation: An Approach to the Study of Literature (New York: Random House, 1972) although the authors have acknowledged Henry James "as the first author to take advantage of the techniques of omniscience." p. 233. This reference demonstrates the authors' sophisticated grasp of the history of the development of point-of-view, but the observation is not pursued to cover multiple, simultaneous narration.

[3]Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White, Readers Theatre Handbook, p. 50.

[4]Judith C. Espinola, "The Nature, Function and Performance of Indirect Discourse in Prose Fiction," Speech Monographs, 41 (August, 1974), 193- 204.

[5]I first became familiar with the specific terms "diachronic" and "synchronic" through the lectures of Eric S. Rabkin, Associate Professor of English Language and Literature, The University of Michigan. In his work, Narrative Suspense (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1973), Professor Rabkin defines diachronic as "that which is extended in temporal sequence; when used of narrative structure, diachronic denotes that structure which follows the order of perception of bits of time as one normally reads or listens." p. 184. Such time is familiarized. Rabkin defines synchronic as "existing at the same time, or out of time." p. 186. Synchronic time, however, is not defamiliarized time, since defamiliarized time, as used in this paper, refers to patternings of temporal concepts in a non-diachronic fashion.

[6]I have only treated of a small portion of the novel in this analysis. I refer the reader to Ken Kesey's Sometimes A Great Notion (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), pp. 191- 271.